

Faithful unto death: picturing a Roman soldier in Victorian Britain

Rosemary Barrow

This year's Pompeii exhibition at the British Museum offers a chance to get acquainted with the lives and deaths of the town's inhabitants. Here Rosemary Barrow shows how the Victorian imagination reacted to one particular story from the ashes.

The 1865 Summer Exhibition at London's Royal Academy of Arts heralded the beginnings of the Victorian classical revival in painting. Six Roman-subject pictures were displayed, all of which departed from traditional History Painting and its depiction of well-known historical and mythological figures in favour of genre scenes of everyday Roman life. Edward Poynter, who was to become a celebrated figure in the Victorian art world and ultimately President of the Royal Academy itself, was then a young painter whose *Faithful unto Death* was one of his first critically acclaimed classicizing works. Combining historical erudition with unashamed sentiment, the picture depicts a scene from the destruction of Pompeii by the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79.

A skeleton in the closet: the origins of the story

The image of a soldier remaining steady at his post in the middle of the volcanic eruption had already appeared in Edward Bulwer Lytton's historical novel *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which shows how Pompeii gripped the popular imagination then as now. Published in 1834, Lytton's work combines archaeological detail with fanciful plot and colourful characters in its narration of the Roman town's demise. Nearing the end of the novel, and mid-eruption, Lytton describes the flight of his characters through a Pompeii devastated by volcanic ash and falling debris:

The air was now still for a few minutes: the lamp from the gate streamed out far and clear: the fugitives hurried on--they gained the gate -- they passed by the Roman

sentry the lightning flashed over his livid face and polished helmet, but his stern features were composed even in their awe! He remained erect and motionless at his post. That hour itself had not animated the machine of the ruthless majesty of Rome into the reasoning and self-acting man. There he stood, amidst the crashing elements: he had not received the permission to desert his station and escape.

The passage derives from archaeological claims that a skeleton was discovered just outside the Herculaneum Gate (below) at Pompeii in 1763. The location was a niche, thought to be a sentry box, and the skeleton was said to be holding a lance and surrounded by armour. Immediately narrativized, a sad but heroic tale of a soldier remaining at his post to face certain death soon circulated in popular and scholarly publications alike.

William Gell's 1817 archaeological handbook *Pompeiana* reports a skeleton of a soldier 'who preferred dying at his post to quitting it for the more ignominious death which, in conformity with the severe discipline of his country, would have awaited him'. A more valiant tone is taken in Charlotte Mary Yonge's 1864 children's book, *A Book of Golden Deeds*, in which

duty kept the sentinel at his post at the gate of Pompeii, even when the stifling dust of ashes came thicker and thicker from the volcano, and the liquid mud streamed down, and the people fled and struggled on, and still the sentry stood at his post, unflinching till death had stiffened his limbs.

The painting

Somewhere between Gell's insensible product of the Roman war machine and Yonge's stoic fool is Poynter's soldier.

Bathed in an eerie red glow the sentry stands at his post. Behind him panic-stricken townspeople try and flee for their lives; some shield themselves from flaming rocks, while others lie dead having already succumbed to rock fall and poisonous gases. As people try to escape with their valuables, precious possessions of gold and silver plate lie scattered around corpses. In the foreground is a smashed amphora and its contents of coins and jewellery. But the young soldier ignores the plunder and looks warily upwards towards the erupting volcano. His face reveals human emotion but his body shows his resolve to stay at his post. Back and legs straight and arms tensed, he grips his spear with steely determination.

The scum of the earth: Poynter's soldier and the British redcoat

Faithful unto Death is particularly striking in elevating an anonymous soldier to the status of hero. At the beginning of the Victorian period, rank and file British soldiers had a poor reputation. Often enlisting as an alternative to prison or destitution, Wellington famously called British troops 'the scum of the earth'. Conditions in the services were harsh with poor rations and severe discipline and no hope of rising up the ranks without the money to buy officer commissions. The Crimean War (1854–6), and its series of military failures, highlighted problems in the British army. The Charge of the Light Brigade, in which misunderstandings between commanders led to around 600 cavalymen charging to their death, was made famous by Tennyson's poem (which was published within six weeks of the event) and brought sympathy towards ordinary soldiers, their privations, and their heroism on the battlefield, to public attention.

The Crimean War also saw the inauguration of the Victoria Cross, the first recognition of valour for all ranks within the British armed forces. The greatest number of Victoria Crosses won on a single day occurred the year after its introduction at the Relief of Lucknow during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. That British civilians were caught up in the fighting and siege shocked the public back home, and fabricated accounts of atrocities perpetrated on women and children abounded. Thus the soldiers who subdued the rebellion were hailed as heroes in a fervour of patriotic pride.

A Victorian background

Placed in this Victorian context, Poynter's Roman soldier acts as a convenient expression of nationalistic sentiment. That the Roman past helped define British imperialism is well established. The teaching of Greek and Latin at public schools and universities ensured that the ruling elite – holders of government, legal, and military posts – knew how to draw on the lessons of classical history. Militaristic masculinity could seek models in Roman stoicism (as propounded by Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius) for a model of living that emphasized commitment, determination, and self control. With the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny still fresh in the public consciousness, *Faithful unto Death* evokes comparisons between Roman and British soldierly resolve.

The picture's title derives from the Book of Revelation 2.10 – 'Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life' – lines popularized in the 1830s by Mendelssohn's *St Paul* oratorio in which they entitle a poignant tenor aria where Paul takes leave of his followers. Poynter was to use the abbreviated version again for an inscription accompanying his frescoes of the martyrdom of Saint Stephen at Saint Stephen's Church in Dulwich. By using Biblical lines for the title of a Pompeian painting here, the artist makes connections between pagan Rome and Christian Britain, and suggests that the past still has relevance for the present.

Alongside parallels with contemporary culture, a key characteristic of Victorian classical-subject painting is its attention to archaeological detail. For his authentic scenes of ancient life, Lawrence Alma-Tadema collected four thousand photographs of Greek and Roman art and architecture. Poynter himself was a member of the Hellenic Society and published work on bronze sculpture in the British Museum. In *Faithful unto Death* historically accurate detail is represented by the soldier's meticulously reconstructed Roman armour of helmet with cheek pieces, segmented breastplate, and heavy

javelin, all used by imperial legions.

A myth debunked

The story of the soldier himself was also seemingly a product of archaeology. Nevertheless, despite the popularity of the narrative, only two years after Poynter's painting the soldier's existence was dismissed as 'pure fable' in Thomas Dyer's *Pompeii: its History, Buildings and Antiquities*. Dyer explains:

The Journal of Excavations know nothing of this soldier, although they always particularly record the discovery of skeletons because in most cases some coins or other property were found near them.

He goes on to explain that the presumed sentry box is actually a tomb. The structure is a small vaulted niche with statue base and seat and an inscription that identifies it as the funerary monument of M. Cerinius Restitutus. Subsequent publications, more interested in the tomb, began to ignore the soldier story altogether. Today's scholars propose that the skeleton – if it ever existed – may have been looking for shelter in the tomb rather than guarding the entrance to the town.

How an account of the soldier's discovery and identification came into being is uncertain. It has been suggested that it originated with 'cicerones', Italian guides who offered tours of Pompeii to European travellers along with embellished tales of the town and its inhabitants (not unlike some of the present-day tour guides you might encounter there). And this soldier's story is a good one: it was described by Mark Twain in *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), after all, as 'perhaps the most poetical thing Pompeii has yielded to modern research'. Poynter's addition of Christian title to his painting adds a timeless quality to his scene, while in mid-Victorian Britain this Roman soldier had particular contemporary resonances of military heroics.

Combining death, destruction, drama, and sentiment, *Faithful unto Death* was well received when it was first exhibited and it remains a popular painting at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool today. As far as Poynter was concerned he was picturing an accurate past that resonated powerfully with his Victorian present. The soldier may indeed embody ideal Roman and Victorian military masculinity, but, as it turns out, character and scenario belong to an entirely fictional Pompeii.

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